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Further rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres

Report of the Secretary-General*

Summary

Pursuant to General Assembly resolutions 57/300, 58/101 B and 59/126 B, the present report provides information on the implementation of the regionalization initiative in Western Europe and in other high-cost developed countries and sets out the proposed strategy for the implementation of the initiative in other regions.

Section II of the report presents an analysis of the current resources available to the network of United Nations information centres. Section III provides an analysis of the resources that would be required for the implementation of the regionalization model as proposed in document A/AC.198/2004/3, and includes information on the operation of the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels. Section IV presents the proposal for the implementation of a regional strategic communications model with a realignment of the network of United Nations information centres, taking into account current financial, political and geographic realities. Subsection A focuses on the situation in other high-cost developed countries and in countries with economies in transition and subsection B covers the situation in developing countries.

Section V concludes that the proposed strategic regional approach to communications will enable the Department to make the most effective use of its existing resources to achieve greater impact. The Department of Public Information intends to keep this process dynamic, and will continue to make the necessary adjustments as priorities change. It also affirms that the views of the Committee on Information will be taken fully into account as it develops further plans to extend the regional concept in developing countries, in consultation with the regional groups and individual Member States concerned.

* Submission of this document was delayed, owing to the need for extensive internal consultations.

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I. Introduction

1. In resolution 59/126 B of 10 December 2004, the General Assembly requested the Secretary-General to submit a progress report on the implementation of the proposal to rationalize the network of United Nations information centres around regional hubs with the objective of applying this initiative in other regions, in consultation with Member States, where this initiative would strengthen the flow and exchange of information in developing countries. In that resolution, the General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report to the Committee on Information at its twenty-seventh session on the rationalization of United Nations information centres in Western Europe and other high-cost developed countries. It also stressed that the special needs and requirements of developing countries in the field of information and communications technology are important factors for the effective flow of information in those countries. Furthermore, the General Assembly affirmed that these measures and objectives, which are central to future rationalization of United Nations information centres, must be carried out in consultation, on a case-by-case basis, with all concerned Member States in which existing information centres are located, the countries served by those information centres and other interested countries in the region, taking into consideration the distinctive characteristics of each region. The General Assembly also requested the Secretary-General to report on the progress made in the consolidation of the United Nations field presence in a single United Nations house. The present report will address the issues raised and the actions requested in the above-mentioned resolution.

2. Underlying further rationalization of the network of United Nations information centres is the Department's strategic approach to communications, emphasizing the use of new technologies, expanded partnerships, and a reallocation of resources to achieve greater overall impact. This approach also takes into account the practical concerns and geographic realities facing such a global network. In developing its plans, the Department of Public Information reaffirms its commitment to a process of consultation with the regional groups and individual Member States concerned.

3. The Department's analysis of the current situation in the field and of the various proposals for further rationalization reveals that further progress towards regionalization would require a level of funding not currently available to the Department. The unanticipated reduction of US$ 2 million from the biennium 2004-2005 allocation for the United Nations information centres drained resources that were intended for strengthening centres in developing countries and facilitating the creation of regional hubs. In addition, rising operational expenditures, such as rent, maintenance and utilities, have further strained the centres' budgets.

4. In the face of these concerns, the Department is recommending a strategic recalibration of the existing network. Key information centres in each region will be strengthened to enable them to play a greater role in providing broad strategic communications guidance, coordination and support to centres in that region. This would help focus the work of information centres on priority thematic issues and concerns of particular relevance in each region, and would help the Department better fulfil its mission statement by communicating more strategically to achieve the greatest public impact in the field.

II. Analysis of the current resources available to the network of United Nations information centres

5. As has previously been explained (see A/AC.198/2004/3), the steady decrease in resources available to United Nations information centres has severely constrained their operational capacities, prompting consideration of regionalization as a means of consolidating resources from several small offices into larger hubs. This concept has been predicated on the assumption that such consolidation would release sufficient resources to permit the establishment of viable regional centres. Regrettably, a number of factors have served to reduce the funds available for the centres' operational needs. The information centres must absorb increased expenses associated with rising fuel prices and other utilities, including the costs of shared premises and rent. Security in the field is another concern that has taken on added importance in recent years, and this too, has absorbed some of the resources that would otherwise have been available for programmatic activity. (It should be noted, however, that funding now provided separately under security phases I and II is expected to largely address these requirements.) In addition, many of the information centres, particularly in developing countries, are adversely affected by the cost recovery system of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), under which UNDP bills information centres for services provided. This new procedure was implemented beginning in August 2003, after the budget for the current biennium had been submitted. Therefore, no allocation for this expenditure was included.

6. As noted above, the information centres' budgetary situation was further adversely affected in December 2003 with the unexpected decision by the General Assembly, at the recommendation of the Fifth Committee, to reduce by $2 million the appropriation to these offices for the biennium 2004-2005. These were funds that the Department had anticipated would be available to help strengthen the centres' outreach capacity, particularly in developing countries. Also, the Department has had to redirect funds normally intended to cover costs more directly associated with programmatic activity, such as communications, printing, translation and travel, to meet rising overhead expenses. In addition, the Department continues to absorb costs associated with the closure of the information centres in Western Europe, owing to residual contractual obligations at those locations.

7. The current financial situation has had an impact on the ability of the centres not only to perform their public information work but also to provide for the upgrade and replacement of information technology equipment essential to their functioning. Since 2001, owing to budgetary limitations, the Department has been unable to replace obsolete communications equipment in information centres except in emergency cases or where the equipment was so old as to no longer be viable. In the context of the information and communication technology strategy elaborated by the Secretary-General, it is vital for United Nations information centres to have the proper technological infrastructure for the timely exchange of information with Headquarters and for communication with local partners. The majority of United Nations information centres operate stand-alone personal computers, hosting numerous applications, and they need up-to-date equipment with the capacity to handle such programme requirements. In addition, they need equipment that is capable of operating on a technical platform compatible with that of their constituencies, in particular the media, allowing for more efficient and effective

outreach. As at the end of 2004, over two thirds of the information centres' information technology and communication equipment was between 5 and 15 years old. Therefore, any replacement plan to address this situation will be very costly.

8. In addition to the financial situation described above, which has steadily worsened in real terms over the past two bienniums, the total budget allocation for the United Nations information centres has also decreased as a result of General Assembly decisions. For years, until the biennium 2002-2003, information centres accounted for between 24 and 25 per cent of the Department's budgetary allocations. In 2002-2003, that amount dropped to 23 per cent, and for the current biennium, it has further declined to 21 per cent, or $33,993,900 (including additional funding for security-related expenses).

9. In recent years, in an effort to offset reductions in posts and to provide the essential level of staffing needed to effectively operate the information centres, the Department has resorted to using general temporary assistance funds to hire local staff in some locations. However, in January 2004, the Department was instructed by the Department of Management to reverse what had become a growing reliance on such funds to meet essential operational functions, and to more strictly monitor and control their use. The redeployment of 20 local-level posts to centres in developing countries, released as a result of the closing of the United Nations information centres in Western Europe, has helped alleviate this problem.

III. Analysis of the resources needed to implement the proposed regional model

10. On the basis of the proposal to extend beyond Western Europe the regional model submitted last year to the Committee on Information in document A/AC.198/2004/3, and taking into account the experience gained through establishing the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels, the Department carried out a structural analysis for the further establishment of regional information centres as outlined in that document. Besides increased staffing requirements, the resources envisaged for each such regional centre included a provision for the production and translation of information materials, communications (including web operations and postage), as well as travel to the countries that would be covered by that centre. The analysis also included the questions of maintaining a few information centres in selected locations, largely within their current level of resource allocation, closing other centres and placing the national information officers within the offices of resident coordinators, as outlined in that plan.

11. The analysis revealed that the level of resources allocated to United Nations information centres would fall far short of meeting the requirements of an adequately resourced regional network. Additional resources would be required beyond the current biennial allocation to cover the ongoing operational costs of such a network. In addition, it can be expected, in the light of Western European experience, that substantial one-time liquidation costs, staff separation packages and start-up costs would be incurred. Moreover, the optimum staffing requirements for the operating model referred to in paragraph 10, particularly in terms of professional and national information officer posts, would considerably exceed the financial and human resources currently available to the Department. Accordingly, while the

implementation of a regional model would remain the ultimate long-term objective, the availability of resources would determine the pace of progress in that direction. Following recent cuts, and as explained in paragraphs 24 and 25 below, the resources are simply not available to pursue large-scale regionalization around the world.

12. While a majority of United Nations information centres are located in rent-free premises, the Department will continue to look into ways and means of reducing the expenditure on rental and maintenance of premises in locations where such costs consume a disproportionate share of the centre's annual budgetary allocation. It will work closely with the host Governments concerned to explore the possibility of identifying rent-free premises or making cash contributions to supplement the allocations from the regular programme budget. In cases where this is not possible, the Department will have no choice but to consider closing those offices or shifting their operations to alternative locations that are more affordable.

13. In addition, as recommended by the Office of Internal Oversight Services in its report (see A/57/747), the Department has already taken steps, in consultation with the Office of Programme Planning, Budget and Accounts, to assign self-accounting responsibilities to selected United Nations information centres. This would save operational funds currently spent on UNDP cost recovery in those locations. The Department is also exploring with UNDP the possibility of excluding all United Nations information centres in developing countries from the cost recovery system, taking into account the principle of reciprocity of services, since the centres provide ongoing public information and communications support to UNDP and other members of United Nations country teams.

14. The Department has initiated discussions with UNDP on the modalities of their joint presence at the field level, including the sharing of common premises and United Nations houses. While co-location has had clear advantages in terms of promoting a unified United Nations image, those advantages are often offset by the high cost of the Department's participation in such arrangements. In addition, information centres need to be accessible to local partners. However, United Nations houses are often not centrally located or easily reached by public transportation, and heightened security considerations make public access difficult. Information centres' reference library collections and meeting facilities requirements result in the need for a considerable space allocation within the common premises. Since common costs are most often calculated on the basis of the space allocated, a centre's share of those costs is usually very high in proportion to its overall staff component. Owing to the costs involved, both for a one-time payment and for ongoing rent and common services charges, the Department was unable to join the other members of the United Nations country team last year in the new United Nations house in Manila. In Nigeria, it was decided that the United Nations information centre should remain in Lagos when most of the country team moved to the new United Nations house in Abuja, owing mainly to the high moving costs involved, which could not be sustained from the Department's budget for information centre operations.

15. The experience gained so far in the establishment and functioning of the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels is also relevant to any further rationalization plan. While it is still too early to provide a complete assessment and lessons learned, the following observations are pertinent. The

regional United Nations information centre opened on 1 January 2004 and moved to its permanent rent-free premises provided by the Government of Belgium in July 2004. Logistical arrangements, including the set-up of information technology and communications equipment, the creation of a local area network and the installation of the reference library collection, were not fully operational until later in the year. Since then, the staff have developed the necessary working environment to enable them to assume a leading role in implementing a more robust, coherent and coordinated public information programme in the region, envisaged as part of the new, more strategic approach to the Organization's communications efforts at the field level.

16. Every effort was made to transfer staff from the nine United Nations information centres in Western Europe that closed on 31 December 2003 to the new regional centre in order to benefit from their skills, experience and institutional memory, to give a jump start to the new operation and to ensure the continuity of United Nations communications efforts in the region. The recruitment for all professional positions is now complete. It is expected that the regional centre will soon be able to fully concentrate on the task of further refining and implementing an effective regional communications strategy aimed at key audiences in Western Europe, with a view to providing a regional perspective to United Nations objectives and concerns.

17. In view of the variety of languages spoken in the region, the centre continues to use the assistance of volunteers, including student interns, to support its information efforts. In addition, discussions are under way with Governments in the region to post junior professional officers to assist in the outreach to audiences in specific countries covered by the centre.

18. As part of the agreement to establish the centre in Brussels, the Government of Belgium generously pledged an annual contribution of $50,000 for the translation and production of information materials by the new office. The host Government has also pledged to contribute to the high cost of the maintenance of the premises. The Government of France has pledged a voluntary contribution in support of the communications activities for that country and some other Governments in the region are expected to follow suit, enabling the regional information centre to strengthen its activities in the countries covered.

19. The report of the Secretary-General on the continuing reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications (A/AC.198/2005/2) provides further information on the programmatic aspects of the work of the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels.

IV. Implementation of a regional strategic communications model through a realignment of the network of United Nations information centres

20. Given all the factors outlined above, the Department will proceed to systematically extend a more strategic communications approach to the network of United Nations information centres. This approach is in keeping with the organizational structure put in place with the reorientation of the Department beginning in November 2002, which located the United Nations information centres

within the Strategic Communications Division. It will be based on a more regional approach to its public information work at the country level, with the development of regional communications strategies to promote the goals and key activities of the United Nations, and the development of public information activities and materials focusing on priority thematic issues and concerns of the region. To facilitate this, adjustments will be made to the current network of United Nations information centres, including a reallocation of posts, with a view to strengthening its operations and ensuring optimal use of resources within the current budgetary allocation.

21. The Department has begun to develop this regional communications approach starting with the Middle East and Arab region. Two communications workshops were held in 2003 and 2004 with the participation of information staff of United Nations information centres, as well as of information professionals from other United Nations organizations working in the region. This initiative, undertaken in cooperation with the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), led to the adoption of a regional communications strategy that calls for coordinated public information activities to explain the Organization's role on priority issues of concern in the region.

22. The Department plans a similar approach in other regions, working with the respective regional commissions and other organizations of the United Nations system to develop and implement joint United Nations information strategies. The initial steps have already been taken in many locations, where local communications groups have been established to coordinate a unified communications effort of the United Nations country team as a whole, under the leadership of the staff of the Department. To supplement these efforts and make progress in the development of a targeted communications strategy for sub-Saharan Africa, the Department is planning to hold a communications workshop in 2005 for information staff of United Nations information centres and information professionals of other United Nations organizations working in that region. This workshop will be funded through an extrabudgetary contribution. Similar workshops in other regions would follow, subject to the availability of extrabudgetary resources.

23. An essential element of the progress towards further physical regionalization of the network of United Nations information centres will be the support of the Member States directly affected by this exercise. After a careful review of the merits of each particular situation, and taking into account the distinctive characteristics of different regions, the Department will continue its consultations with regional groups and with the Member States concerned with a view to extending the regional concept wherever this approach would strengthen the flow and exchange of information.

24. At the same time, the Department confronts a central dilemma. The creation of regional hubs requires the reallocation of funds released by the closing of national information centres. This presumes that the level of operational resources available would be adequate for the establishment of viable regional hubs.

25. However, as outlined in paragraph 11, and with the resources currently available, the Department recognizes that it is impossible to create regional hubs comparable to the model used for Western Europe, as was envisaged in document A/AC.198/2004/3. It also recognizes that the closure of information centres located in rent-free premises, and the abolition of local-level posts in developing countries, will not generate sufficient resources to compensate for the higher operational costs

of the regional hubs, which would be expected to cover numerous countries without support at the national level. The establishment of the regional United Nations information centre in Brussels points to the need for resources both for closing costs of United Nations information centres and for increased travel from regional United Nations information centres. Moreover, in many developing countries, outreach in the traditional media, which relies on a continued presence on the ground, remains essential.

26. In the present circumstances, the Department continues to explore other measures to underpin its regional outreach. The recruitment of highly qualified national information staff, who are able to provide a local voice to global United Nations messages in local languages, is critical to the effective delivery of the Department's communications messages. However, since the introduction of the national information officer category in the network of United Nations information centres in 1994-1995, the number of such posts has not matched the emerging needs. Accordingly, in its realignment of resources within the network, the Department would seek approval in the future, through the appropriate budgetary process, for the conversion of nine information assistant posts to the national information officer level. The benefits of the proposed conversion to the communications work of the United Nations country teams far outweigh the minimal costs involved to achieve this. Indeed, as part of the realignment of the network of information centres, the Department proposes to have the national information officer as its most senior staff member in all locations where its international staff would not be deployed.

27. Furthermore, as recommended by the Office of Internal Oversight Services (recommendation 18 of the internal audit report of 14 October 2002), the Department is seeking to introduce the national officer C grade (in addition to the current A and B grades) to the network, so as to retain highly qualified national information staff and provide them with a career development opportunity. It should be noted that this, and higher levels, have been widely used in other United Nations organizations working in the field to identify and retain highly qualified and motivated national staff.

A. Developed countries and countries with economies in transition

28. In addition to Western Europe, the Department maintains information centres in Sydney, Tokyo and Washington, D.C. Four other centres are operating in countries with economies in transition, located in Bucharest, Moscow, Prague and Warsaw.

29. Further to an agreement reached with the Government of Australia in 2004 to relocate the information centre in Sydney to rent-free premises in Canberra, the Secretariat is working closely with the Australian authorities to implement the agreement as soon as possible and to proceed with the move. This will release funds that are currently used to pay the rental of premises for programme activities to enable the centre to more effectively meet its regional responsibilities. Subject to consultations with the Member States concerned, this centre could also be given responsibility for providing information services to Papua New Guinea and the Solomon Islands, in addition to New Zealand and the seven Pacific countries it currently serves, provided that adequate resources are available for this purpose.

30. The United Nations information centre in Tokyo continues to play an important role in promoting the work of the United Nations in Japan, with the generous support of the host Government. Effective in 2005, the Government has pledged to increase its annual extrabudgetary contribution to the centre to $350,000.

31. The United Nations Information Centre in Washington, D.C., plays a vital liaison role with the host country of the United Nations and serves a broad constituency, including the United States Administration and Congress, media, non-governmental organizations, educational institutions and the general public. As the lease for the centre's premises is due to expire later this year, negotiations have been initiated to secure a new lease for a smaller space at a reduced cost.

32. The information centre in Moscow has been playing an effective role as a hub for the production of information materials in Russian and has been coordinating the translation and sharing of information products in that language with offices in other countries where Russian is spoken. This centre could be expected to expand its regional role in the future, in consultation with the Governments concerned. The Department is initiating contacts with the Government of the Russian Federation with a view to identifying rent-free or rent-subsidized premises to reduce the current high rental cost in that location.

33. The information centres in Bucharest, Prague and Warsaw, all of which benefit from rent-free (or symbolic cost) premises in addition to other extrabudgetary support from their host Governments, play an important communications role in their respective countries and work closely with other members of United Nations country teams in their locations. The United Nations Information Service in Vienna, in addition to its other responsibilities, provides broad strategic communications guidance to those centres. In view of the low cost of the operations, and pending consultations with the Member States concerned regarding the options to be considered in the future, as well as the status of UNDP offices in those capitals, the Secretary-General proposes to retain the present arrangements there for the time being, as well as in Ankara, where an information centre works under the leadership of the resident coordinator.

B. Developing countries

34. The Department operates 47 United Nations information centres in developing countries. Of these, four centres are currently not operational: Kabul, Kinshasa, Managua and Monrovia. The centres in Kabul and Managua have not been operational for some time and have been closed. The information centres in Kinshasa and Monrovia were temporarily closed in 2004 because of the crippling financial costs of maintaining a presence in locations where security and other concerns have exponentially increased operating expenditures, while security precautions had left those centres inaccessible to visitors. At the same time, the information components of United Nations peacekeeping missions in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and in Liberia carry out the role that the information centres in those locations had played in the past.

35. Of the 43 remaining centres in developing countries, 19 are headed by staff from the Department of Public Information, 23 by resident coordinators, and one by a staff member of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The information centres in developing countries have 20 Professional posts, 33 national

information officer posts and 136 General Service posts. Following the regionalization exercise in Western Europe, three posts at the D-1 level were released for deployment to other regions and have been allocated to Cairo, Mexico City and Pretoria.

1. African States

36. There are a total of 18 information centres in sub-Saharan Africa located in Accra, Antananarivo, Brazzaville, Bujumbura, Dakar, Dar es Salaam, Harare, Kinshasa (not operational), Lagos, Lomé, Lusaka, Maseru, Monrovia (not operational), Nairobi, Ouagadougou, Pretoria, Windhoek and Yaoundé. Five of the centres in Africa are headed by staff of the Department of Public Information (Accra, Dakar, Harare, Lagos and Pretoria). In addition, the Department provides the post of the Deputy Director at the United Nations information centre in Nairobi, which is headed by the Director of Communications and Public Information of UNEP and has an information officer in the centre in Dar es Salaam.

37. Taking into account the views of the Member States concerned regarding the need to maintain the Department's physical presence on the ground, wherever possible, in the light of the special needs of developing countries in the field of public information and communications, as well as in view of the low operational cost of most centres in Africa, the Department would propose to retain its current offices in this region for the time being.

38. In order to meet the geopolitical and linguistic needs of the region, and to provide more effective strategic communications guidance to the distinctive subregions of the continent, the Department proposes a realignment of its staff resources at the Professional level, following the subregional model established by the New Partnership for Africa's Development and the African Union. Accordingly, the centres in Dakar, Lagos, Nairobi, Pretoria and Yaoundé would assume a broader subregional programmatic mandate and take on a coordinating role in providing strategic communications guidance and support to existing United Nations information centres in Africa, in close cooperation with other United Nations organizations active on the ground.

39. The proposals for the regionalization of the network of United Nations information centres in Africa presented to the Committee on Information in 2004 in document A/AC.198/2004/3 included the redeployment of a D-1 post released from the regionalization of the United Nations information centres in Western Europe to a new regional United Nations information centre in Addis Ababa. The analysis of the resource requirements for creating such an information centre revealed that the resources available would not allow for the implementation of such a proposal at this time, while the mere redeployment of a senior post, without adequate support staff or operational resources, would serve no purpose. It has therefore been decided to seek to fulfil the United Nations public information needs in Addis Ababa through enhanced cooperation between the Department of Public Information and the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA), a subject of several consultations between the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and the Executive Secretary of ECA. Accordingly, this D-1 post is being deployed to the United Nations information centre in Pretoria, to allow that centre to assume a coordinating role and added regional programmatic responsibilities, which include providing strategic communications guidance and support to all United Nations

information centres in sub-Saharan Africa. The P-5 post of centre Director in Pretoria will then be moved to Yaoundé to enhance strategic communications guidance and support in French-speaking Africa.

40. The Department has carefully reviewed the available resources within the programme budget for the current biennium, with a view to taking into account the needs of Portuguese-speaking African countries and the offer made by the Government of Angola to open a United Nations information centre in Luanda. Given the overall budgetary situation of the United Nations information centres, there are no resources available within the regular programme budget to meet the cost of opening and operating an additional centre within the allocation for the current biennium. Accordingly, either an additional appropriation to the regular programme budget of the Organization or an extrabudgetary contribution at a level to be determined in consultation with the Member States concerned would be required to meet the one-time and recurrent operating costs of such an office.

2. Asian States

41. There are currently 11 information centres in the Asian States, located in Colombo, Dhaka, Islamabad, Jakarta, Kabul (now closed), Kathmandu, Manila, New Delhi, Tehran, Tokyo and Yangon. Five of the centres are headed by staff members of the Department of Public Information (Islamabad, Jakarta, New Delhi, Tehran and Tokyo). In addition, an information officer of the Department is outposted to the United Nations Information Services at the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) under the responsibility of the Chief of that service.

42. In view of the size of the continent and its geopolitical and linguistic complexity — ESCAP has 53 members — no changes are envisaged in this region at this time. However, a reallocation of existing post resources to strengthen the regional responsibilities of the United Nations Information Services Bangkok is being pursued.

43. It should be noted that most centres in this region benefit from low-rent or rent-free premises. The Department will initiate discussions with the host Governments in selected locations with a view to identifying rent-free premises where they do not currently exist or obtaining rental subsidies, thus allowing for savings to be redirected to outreach activities.

3. Latin American and Caribbean States

44. There are 10 information centres in the Latin American and Caribbean States, located in Asunción, Bogotá, Buenos Aires, La Paz, Lima, Managua (now closed), Mexico City, Panama City, Port of Spain and Rio de Janeiro. Five information centres are headed by the staff of the Department: Bogotá, Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Port of Spain and Rio de Janeiro, while the others are headed by resident coordinators.

45. The Department proposes that the United Nations information centre in Mexico City, headed by a Director at the D-1 level, assume the coordinating role in providing strategic communications guidance to the entire region. The Department has initiated consultations with the Government of Mexico with a view to

identifying suitable rent-free premises or securing a generous extrabudgetary contribution to reduce the considerable operational cost of this centre.

46. The United Nations information centre in Port of Spain, covering 13 Member States, has in effect been functioning as the regional centre for the English-speaking Caribbean region. The Department intends to initiate discussions with the Government of Trinidad and Tobago and the other Members States concerned, with a view to securing rent-free premises for this centre or a subsidy to cover the high rental cost in this location. The resulting savings would be used to increase the budgetary allocation for outreach, including travel, thus ensuring periodic visits to the geographically vast area covered by the centre.

47. The United Nations information centre in Buenos Aires would assume broader subregional communications responsibilities in South America. The Department's operational cost in this media hub is very low in view of its centrally located, rent-free premises and an extrabudgetary Government contribution that covers maintenance costs. The information centre in Rio de Janeiro, a key media hub, is located in rent-free premises and plays an important role in reaching a variety of constituencies in Brazil. It also extends essential communications support to the remainder of the United Nations country team (in Brasilia), providing it with the contacts and the venue for its communications activities.

48. In view of the fact that the remaining information centres in the region are relatively low-cost operations and play an active role in their respective communities, it is proposed that they be retained for the time being.

4. League of Arab States region

49. Information centres are located in nine capitals of the States members of the League of Arab States: Algiers, Beirut, Cairo, Khartoum, Manama, Rabat, Sana'a, Tripoli and Tunis. The centres in Beirut, Cairo and Sana'a are currently headed by staff of the Department who serve as Directors, while others are headed by resident coordinators. The Department also has an information officer outposted to ESCWA.

50. A Director at the D-1 level will soon be appointed to head the United Nations information centre in Cairo, which will assume a regional coordinating role in the production of information materials in Arabic and the targeted dissemination of United Nations messages in the region. A P-5 post released following the regionalization of the centres in Western Europe has been redeployed for the post of Director of the United Nations information centre in Beirut and the selection process for this position is under way. It is also proposed that, in view of the low cost of their operation, the remaining centres in this region be retained for the time being, pending further review of their operations and effectiveness, within the framework of the new regional communications strategy outlined in paragraph 21 above.

V. Conclusion

51. As explained above, the Department will proceed systematically to extend a regional strategic approach to communications to the rest of the network of United Nations information centres. As part of that approach, and working within its current budgetary allocation, the Department will undertake a strategic realignment of existing staff resources within the network in order to enhance it and make it

more effective for greater impact. As part of that concept, information centres in certain key locations will assume broader programmatic responsibilities and provide strategic communications guidance and support to other offices within their region. The Department will retain the flexibility to keep this process dynamic and continue to make the necessary adjustments as priorities change.

52. While proceeding with the implementation of the regional approach to communications, the Department lacks the necessary staff and budgetary resources to physically implement the regional model at the operational level. An initial structural analysis of regionalization of the centres in developing countries, as outlined in A/AC.198/2004/3, reveals that the anticipated costs would far exceed available resources and therefore would not be a viable alternative to the existing structure at this time. The redeployment of three posts at the D-1 level and 20 local-level posts to centres in developing countries has enhanced the ability of the network to meet the communications challenges in the regions where presence on the ground remains important to an effective United Nations outreach to key constituencies. Many centres in developing countries already operate at a low cost, and can enhance their impact on target audiences through more strategic communications support at the regional level.

53. In addition, as indicated above, an adequate level of operational resources is essential for progress towards a broader realignment of the network of United Nations information centres in consultation with regional groups and individual Member States concerned.